COMMUNICATION: EFFECTIVE WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

3–G

Job Performance Situation 3:
Building Essential Skills
in Facilitation,
Decision-Making, and
Communication

HEAD START
MOVING AHEAD
COMPETENCY-BASED TRAINING PROGRAM

Developed under Delivery Order No. 105-99-2091, the Head Start Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Revised in 2000 by the American Institutes for Research under contract number 105-94-2020

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REFERENCE

This activity addresses skill competencies in effective written communication. Participants will learn to identify areas for improvement in their current style of writing; use appropriate wording and tone in written documents; and ensure proper use of grammar, punctuation and spelling. Participants will also explore the appropriate format for note-taking and writing memos, letters, and reports. They will consider how these skills can be used in a Head Start work situation.

Related skill activities include: 3-E, Communication: Effective Spoken Communication; 3-F, Communication: Active Listening Skills.

Sources:

Fruehlink, Rosemary T., and N.B. Oldham. 1993. *Write to the Point*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Books.

Dumaine, Deborah. 1997. *Vest Pocket Guide to Business Writing*. Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Blake, Gary, and Robert W. Bly, 1991. *The Elements of Business Writing*. New York, NY: MacMillan, Inc.

EFFECTIVE WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Outcomes. Participants who complete this activity will be able to:

- Understand the importance of good writing skills to their Head Start job functions.
- Identify areas for improvement in their current style of writing.
- Set the proper tone for a written document.
- Select the appropriate wording and phrasing for expressing the intent of specific written documents.
- Identify and correct common grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors.
- Determine the appropriate format for note-taking and writing memos, letters, and reports.
- Write clear and concise statements of program review findings and program strengths for use in program review reports.

Materials. Writing paper, pen (or laptop computer*)*.

Components. This activity can be completed by one person, an informal group, or as part of a formal workshop. Suggested time limits are provided below, but participants and facilitators may wish to adjust these to their own timetables.

Step 1. Exercise: Letter to My Supervisor	30 minutes
Step 2. Background Reading: Basic Elements of Effective Writing (Part 1)	20 minutes
Step 3. Worksheet: What Are Your Writing Habits?	30 minutes
Step 4. Background Reading: Basic Elements of Effective Writing (Part 2) Handout: Writing Task Focus Sheet	20 minutes
Step 5. Worksheet: Consider Your Reader	30 minutes
Step 6. Exercise: Letter to My Supervisor (Part 2)	30 minutes
Step 7. Background Reading: Writing Effective Notes, Letters, Memos, and Reports	30 minutes
Step 8. Worksheet: Practice Writing Strengths and Findings Handout: Examples of Strengths and Findings	45 min.
Step 9. Worksheet: Writing Assignment Handout: Effective Writing Checklist	60 minutes
Step 10: Summary	10 minutes
Suggested Total Time:	5 hours 5 min.

This activity contains 40 pages.

STEP 1. WORKSHEET: LETTER TO MY SUPERVISOR

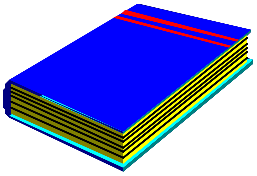
Suggested time: 30 min.

Purpose: To provide participants an opportunity to practice writing in their current style for later review and assessment. This activity can be done individually, with a colleague, or in a small group.

Write a one-page letter to your supervisor informing him or her that you will be participating in this learning activity, what you will learn, how you will learn it, and how you expect to use these skills in your work. Carefully review the letter to ensure that you are satisfied with what you have written.

You may proceed to Step 2 when your letter is complete.

STEP 2. BACKGROUND READING: BASIC ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE WRITING (PART 1)



Suggested time: 20 min.

Purpose: Participants will review and discuss basic elements of writing habits and style. This activity can be done individually, with a colleague, or in a small group.

Study the following reading. Feel free to highlight sections or write comments in the margin throughout these activities.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE WRITING

Introduction

The ability to write—and do so effectively—is an evolving skill that is crucial to workplace performance. Written expression of ideas, feelings, proposals, observations, assessments, and directives is just as important as spoken expression, since written documents become a permanent record of what we say and hear. The content of a conversation can be forgotten within minutes. However, a written document lives on as a record of thoughts and decisions that can be shared with others.

Being able to write effectively is an important skill for Head Start staff (both program and Federal) at all levels. The daily operation of Head Start programs requires a tremendous amount of record keeping on program activities; communication of information to staff, parents, and community partners; and written response to Federal and other funding source directives and requests for information. Similarly, Federal staff are responsible for providing guidance and support to programs, often through written documents.

Good writing skills are essential in order to deal with the amount of written documentation and communication required of Head Start staff. Poorly written internal letters, memos, and reports can detract from the impact of the message or completely miscommunicate its intent. The quality of a written document can also provide a lasting impression of the program's capabilities and a sense of professionalism to those outside of the program (e.g., parents, members of the governing body, and the general community).

No one is exempt from making errors in writing, regardless of his or her job function within Head Start. We all establish a style of writing early on in our work and personal experience. Unless we seek out and receive instruction in improving our writing skills, there is a tendency to continue to make the same mistakes, unaware that we are doing anything wrong. Those of us who are fortunate enough to receive feedback from others within the organization can make efforts to correct writing mistakes; however, feedback is not always forthcoming. In many instances, writing errors are either corrected by an editor, a word processor, or a supervisor and never discussed with the writer.

The focus of this skill-building activity is to provide general guidance for identifying and correcting common writing problems. The following reading outlines the elements of effective writing, including: the correct use of grammar, punctuation, and spelling; correct use of words and phrases; and proper organization and expression of thoughts and ideas.

Overcoming Bad Writing Habits

Many of us consistently make errors that become habits and part of our writing style. Such habits hinder our communication, causing us to miscommunicate the meaning and intent of the message. Consistent miscommunication is an indication that we have not yet mastered the mechanics of writing.

The written word is very powerful and can, at times, have more of an impact than the spoken word. In face-to-face communication, we can avoid miscommunication by explaining misunderstood ideas. On the other hand, when someone reads a letter or memo we have written, the words must speak for themselves—we do not have an opportunity to clarify or explain our message if the reader misunderstands it. Therefore, much thought and planning must be given to what we write and whether it expresses our ideas.

When we write, we must constantly focus on how to involve and engage the reader(s) by being clear and concise. Time is limited within the workplace environment, and reading mail, memos, reports, and E-mails is often secondary to other job tasks. Your reader will not have a lot of time to find your message and will want you to get to the point quickly!

A clear and concise message is often hampered by one or more of the following bad writing habits:

1. Not directly saying what we mean.
2. Using too many words.
3. Using unfamiliar words or jargon.
4. Not expressing our feeling for the content.

Bad Habit # 1: Not Directly Saying What We Mean

We often have difficulty making our point in writing. Many people sidestep or evade what they really want to say by over-explaining their intentions.

> *Example:*
> Due to unexpected and continued high usage of the program's health care services covered under Head Start funds, it will be necessary to increase our budget in this area, effective January 2000.
>
> *To the point:*
> Our health services budget must increase effective January 2000.

Writing tip: Clearly state up front what you want to do, and then provide a brief explanation. Don't make the reader search for your real message. Avoid trying to soften bad news by over-explaining before you give the message.

> *Example:*
> Your grant proposal has been thoroughly reviewed with great interest. Although it has much merit, it has regretfully been determined that a negative response must be given at this time.
>
> *To the point:*
> We are sorry to inform you that although your request has merit, we cannot grant Head Start funding.

Writing tip: Do not give false hope in order to soften the blow. If something is not going to happen, state that clearly. For example, writing "at this time" may give the impression that a grant may be awarded at a later time. No means no. Avoid language that could confuse the reader.

Bad Writing Habit #2: Using Too Many Words

> *Example:*
> The program has on its payroll a total of 27 employees, of whom 15 are salaried, and 12 are in the hourly rate group.
>
> *Concise:*
> The program has 27 staff, of whom 15 are salaried and 12 are hourly.

Writing tip: Using unnecessary words increases the reader's work, adds nothing to the reader's understanding the real message, and can lose the reader's interest. Determine if a message can be communicated with fewer words.

Example:
I am enclosing in this package a draft of the program's self-assessment results for you to review and provide us with feedback.

Concise:
Enclosed is a draft of the self-assessment results for review and feedback.

Bad Writing Habit # 3: Using Unfamiliar Words or Jargon

Example:
The program uses a plethora of approaches and best practices to move its children toward eminent completion of the program.

Clear:
The program uses a number of approaches that have been proven effective in ensuring that our children successfully complete the program.

Writing tip: Big words such as "plethora," and jargon phrases such as "best practices" may be impressive to some readers, but may cloud the message and frustrate others. Consider the reader and aim to express your thoughts and ideas clearly.

Bad Writing Habit # 4: Not Conveying Feeling for What is Written

Example:
I was sincerely pleased to receive your extensive comments on your child's experience in the classroom. I am sure they will be helpful to our future planning.

Sincere:
Thank you so much for taking time to provide feedback on your child's experience. Your comments will be very helpful in our upcoming review of classroom practices.

Writing tip: Readers of the first version may not feel that their comments were appreciated or taken seriously. You should express sincere feelings in your written expression. Use simple words that clearly express sincerity and stand less chance of being interpreted as arrogant or insincere. Hint: It is best to try to express true sincerity in your message, instead of simply telling the reader that you are sincere.

> *Example:*
> Your teaching qualifications and experience are admirable, and we are sure that you will not have a problem finding a position commensurate to your outstanding abilities. Unfortunately, we have hired another candidate who more closely matches our current needs for this position. We sincerely appreciate your submitting your application, and will keep your outstanding resume in our files.
>
> *Sincere:*
> Although your teaching qualifications and experience are excellent, we have hired another person whose background more closely fits our needs. Thank you for applying, and good luck in your job search.

Writing tip: This example depicts how sincerity can be over-expressed to the point of becoming insincere. Avoid using superlatives (e.g., admirable, outstanding, etc.) that can distort the message. A reader of the example would wonder why he or she did not get the job, and might miss the message that there was not a fit between her background and the program's needs.

Avoiding these four bad writing habits is a matter of practice and common sense. Seek to be as clear, concise, to the point, and sincere as possible in your writing. Put yourself in the reader's shoes and use his point of view as your focus.

Establishing Good Writing Habits

To counteract bad habits, effective writers must establish habits that encourage a simpler, more straightforward approach to written expression. The key to effective writing is skill in:

1. writing in active voice
2. brevity
3. clarity
4. staying positive and specific.

Good Writing Habit #1: Writing in an Active Voice

When you write in active voice, you give life and action to your words and message. The subject of the sentence is acted upon in the passive voice; in the active voice, the subject of the sentence acts.

> *Example:*
> Passive—The operation of your program is made easier with an involved Policy Council.

Active—An involved Policy Council makes program operations easier.

Writing tip: An active voice delivers a message with more force and makes your writing style more direct. It also gives more importance to the action.

Example:
Passive —The Head Start teacher is responsible for outlining and organizing instruction in the classroom.

Active —The Head Start teacher outlines and organizes classroom instruction.

Writing tip: Use direct, active words. In the example above, “is responsible” is not grammatically passive, but is less direct than “outlines and organizes.”

At times, the tone of a document may call for the passive voice.

Example:
Active—I have reviewed your work and find it to be unsatisfactory.

Passive—Your work has been reviewed and found to be unsatisfactory.

Writing tip: Use a passive voice when you want to remain impersonal or anonymous regarding a particular action—this is often less threatening to the reader.

Good Writing Habit # 2: Brevity

Communicating your message briefly and clearly helps guarantee that your letters, memos, E-mails, and reports will receive desired attention. Readers can be frustrated by documents that take too long to get to the point and cloud the message with unnecessary words.

Example:
The Happy Child Head Start program is in a position to be a much better program this year. We are in possession of the largest amount of funding we have ever had. The program has at all times sought to improve services by means of effective financial management. At this point in time, we are experiencing an increase in enrollment due to the fact that we have conducted much advanced planning to extend our services to special needs children.

> *Revised:*
> The Happy Child Head Start program will provide better services this year because we have increased funding. The program is always seeking to improve services through effective financial management. We expect our enrollment to increase as we expand our services to children with disabilities.

Writing tip: Use shorter phrases and fewer words to get your point across briefly and clearly. The following examples show some wordy phrases and their simplified replacements:

Wordy phrases	Use instead
is in a position to	can
in possession of	have
at all times	always
by means of	by
at this point in time	now
due to the fact	since
advanced planning	planning or plans

Brevity does not mean shortchanging the reader on necessary and complete information. Always remember to include essential details the reader expects to find or needs to know in your message. Stick to what is relevant for the reader to know now, as opposed to providing every detail about the subject—unless it is specifically required. Providing explanations and instructions can be particularly confusing and burdensome if the information is not all there, or even if there is too much information.

> *Example:*
> Classrooms must be set up to allow an appropriate number of children to participate in the various activities going on in the class. Our teachers are required to provide a light and creative atmosphere within the classrooms. We expect all new teachers to conform to these standards.
>
> *Revised:*
> Classrooms must be set up to allow no more than 3–4 children at each of the 5 play/work areas. Teachers can decorate their classes with bright colors and use themes that enhance the curriculum.

Writing tip: In your attempts at brevity, make sure you provide the type of information that will support what you want the reader to do. Ask yourself which of the preceding examples would support the action required of the reader.

Good Writing Habit # 3: Clarity

As with brevity, clarity is a critical element of effective writing. To get to the point and keep your message relevant, your intent and meaning must be clear. Avoid the bad habits discussed above, and review your document to ensure that what you wrote is what you want to communicate. Check words and phrases to ensure they will be clear to your reader(s). Try to simplify the words you use so your message is as clear as possible. Do not assume that everyone with whom you communicate will understand or relate to your particular style of writing. Play it safe by keeping your wording and phrasing simple and clear.

Good Writing Habit # 4: Staying Positive and Specific

Writing in a positive tone is another way to engage the reader's interest. People tend to respond well to a positive tone, even when it is contained in a negative message. A positive tone generally tends to be more direct.

> *Examples*:
> Negative—We do not hold parent meetings after 7 p.m. during the week or on weekends.
>
> Positive—All parent meetings are held during the week between 4 and 6 p.m.
>
> Negative—Programs cannot spend over $2,000 for unspecified miscellaneous expenses.
>
> Positive—Programs can spend up to $2,000 for unspecified miscellaneous expenses.

Writing tip: To set a positive tone in your writing, try substitutions for phrases that include the word "not." For example:

Look for	Use instead
not sure	uncertain
not on time	late
not possible	impossible
not aware	unaware

It is also helpful to downplay words that can trigger emotional reactions, such as the following:

- blame
- error
- mistake
- fault
- inferior
- reject
- inadequate

As stated earlier, it is also important to be specific. Avoid vague words or phrases. For example:

Vague—A number of our teachers attended the training.

Specific—Ten of our teachers attended the training.

Vague—We will send out a summary of our program self-assessment within the next month.

Specific—We will send out a summary of our program self-assessment by December 30.

Vague—Our internal communications are not functioning on time.

Specific—Staff are not responding to our internal memos, E-mails, and reports within the appropriate 5-day response period.

Writing tip: When facts and details are available, provide them! Do not keep the reader guessing or assuming about the meaning of your message and how to respond.

STEP 3. WORKSHEET: WHAT ARE YOUR WRITING HABITS?

Suggested time: 30 min.

Purpose: Participants will explore their writing habits and the impact of effective writing skills on job performance. This worksheet can be completed individually or with a colleague.

Answer the following questions. Once completed, you may discuss your answers with a colleague.

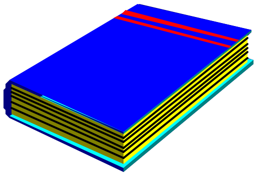
1. Based on the preceding background reading, what are some of your “bad” writing habits?

2. What are your “good” writing habits?

3. How critical are good writing skills to your job functions and performance within Head Start? Specifically, in what areas of your job are writing skills essential?

4. What types of documents (e.g., memos, letters, notes, or reports) do you find most difficult to write, and why?

STEP 4. BACKGROUND READING: ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE WRITING (PART 2)



Suggested time: 20 min.

Putting the Reader First

Although the intent of written communication is to inform others, many of us base our writing on what pleases ourselves. Our writing style consists of habits we establish over many years, combined with bits and pieces of styles we pick up from other writers. Essentially, we write in a style that we like reading.

In business writing, style can be just as important as substance. Unlike a casual reader, the business reader does not have time to become leisurely engaged in the material. In fact, time devoted to reading and responding to written information in the workplace is limited. We have so much to read and respond to that we are forced to be selective in what we take time to read. Usually we choose to read and respond to documents that pertain directly to our job tasks, are related to a priority task, or require a quick response. Documents that receive our less-than-immediate attention are those that provide information not crucial to our daily jobs.

It is for these reasons that the most basic element of effective writing is to put the reader's interests first. In doing so, you acknowledge that what you are writing will compete with other documents and tasks in a busy workday. Your style of writing must pique your readers' interests and make the best use of their limited time. You must engage them immediately and assure them that your document is worth reading.

You should ask two main questions to be sure that you put your reader's interests first:

- What information do I need to convey?
- How are my intended reader(s) likely to respond?

To answer these questions, you must thoroughly analyze the message you want to send. The Writing Task Focus Sheet handout is designed to assist you in determining the content of your document by examining the interests of the reader. Depending on the length and content of your document, you will want to complete all or just a portion of the focus sheet. It is a tool for you to use as necessary to help you complete your writing task.

The focus sheet addresses four main areas of writing: purpose, audience, main point or bottom line, and strategy.

Purpose

As a business writer, your purpose generally is to inspire or encourage the reader toward some form of action or agreement on a particular issue. It is best to identify your purpose and make it an active statement. When completing this section of the focus sheet, specify your purpose by using active phrases such as:

to inform
to report findings
to recommend
to motivate
to analyze
to respond
to propose
to request
to explain
to announce
to praise
to persuade
to guide
to assist
to support

The purpose of a business document often goes beyond simple information. The reader is usually required to do something with the information, either immediately or in the future. As a writer you need to consider what final result you seek. You must determine why the reader needs to be informed and what he or she is expected to do with the information.

Audience

Defining your audience becomes complicated when you are writing a document for more than one reader, as is usually the case in business writing. This segment is designed to assist you in creating a picture of your readers and their needs.

Give consideration to how your readers will respond to the message you intend to send. Is it a message to which they will be receptive? resistant? apprehensive? indifferent? Their anticipated reaction will help you select the proper tone (e.g., directive, tactful, politely conversational, etc.).

In addition to considering the tone of your message, it is also important to:

- Limit use of technical language, even with a technical audience. It makes the document difficult to read, thus increasing chances that the reader may only skim the document and miss something important. You need to determine if every intended reader will have the same level of knowledge on the subject, and adapt your language so that all readers will understand it.

- Select your tone based on the nature of the document. Internal memos and E-mails, as well as most business letters, can be written in a friendly tone. In contrast, a report, proposal, or directive requires a formal tone. Don’t confuse the reader by writing in a tone that gives a different message than the one you want to convey.

Main Point or Bottom Line

Your writing will be clearer and more concise once you determine the main point or bottom line of the document. What, above all else in your document, do you want the readers to remember? This becomes especially important in longer, more involved documents. If a reader cannot figure out the main point of your message immediately, he or she may not read it all the way through. If readers don’t see the point, you lose their interest.

Strategy

Now that you have defined your purpose, analyzed the needs and interests of the intended audience, and identified the main point of your message, the next step is to form a strategy for writing. At this point you need to determine:

- Whether this is the best time to convey your message. Are there other competing concerns or activities that will distract the readers’ attention or impact their availability (e.g., major deadlines or deliverables, upcoming business travel, or vacations)?

- What would be the best format for your message. Based on the size and content of the message, is it best to send it as an E-mail, letter, memo, or formal report? Not all messages are appropriate for E-mail, and not all of your intended readers may be very responsive to it.

- What action, if any, the reader will need to take in response. Specify tasks, timelines, and expected outcomes that will need to be strategically placed and highlighted in the document.

All of the information called for in the focus sheet is designed to help you determine the scope of your writing—what information must be included and what should be left out. From here you will be able to determine the depth of coverage you need to give the subject and organize the information accordingly.

Composing Your Thoughts

Getting your thoughts down on paper in a clear and concise manner takes time and practice. You may have to write one or two drafts before you have corrected your bad writing habits and incorporated good ones. If you continue to keep the reader's interests in mind, the process of composing a memo, letter, E-mail, or report will become simpler over time.

In addition to the tips provided above about writing in an active voice, being clear and concise, and focusing your message, effective composition also includes the following rules of writing:

- Avoid long sentences. Try to keep sentences concise. Judge for yourself how long your sentence should be by reading it aloud. If you run out of breath before you finish, it's probably too long. Consider eliminating redundant wording or phrases. Resist being too wordy.

- Break writing down into sections. Divide your subject into topics and cover each topic in relatively short paragraphs. This will guide the reader through the logical sequence of your ideas. Each new paragraph should focus on a new topic that the reader can easily absorb. Each paragraph should be 10 lines or fewer, with a variety of sentence lengths.

- Write in a natural, conversational style. Use a tone that you would normally use with the reader in conversation. Try to stay away from being too technical or formal, unless the situation demands this type of approach. Although you may want to set a conversational tone, avoid using slang or colloquial expressions in your writing.

- Separate fact from opinion. Clearly identify what is fact and what is your opinion. This becomes critical when you are asking the reader to make an important decision based on the information you have provided. Support factual information with references and sources. Preface information that is not necessarily factual with, "I believe…" or "It is my understanding that..." so the reader can clearly identify your opinions. In the business world, your opinions can carry as much weight as fact, but they must be clearly identified to the reader.

Punctuation, Grammar, Abbreviation, Capitalization, and Spelling

The handout "Basic Rules of Punctuation, Grammar, Abbreviations, Capitalization, and Spelling" at the end of the module provides a discussion of common concerns for writers in the proper use of punctuation, grammar, abbreviation, capitalization, and correct spelling. Examples of proper and improper use are provided as a reference when composing or reviewing written documents.

HANDOUT: WRITING TASK FOCUS SHEET[1]

Instructions: Answer the questions below to prepare for your writing tasks.

1. Purpose

- Why am I writing this?
- What do I want the reader to do?

2. Audience

- Who is my reader? Is there more than one?
- What is the reader's role/function related to my subject?
- What is the reader's level of knowledge about the subject?
- How will the reader feel about this subject?
- How will the reader benefit? Why should the reader agree?
- How will the reader use this document?

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[1] Adapted from *Vest Pocket Guide to Business Writing*, by Deborah Dumaine, © 1997 by Prentice Hall, Paramus, NJ.

3. Main Point/Bottom Line

- What main point do I want remembered?

4. Strategy

- Should I or someone else be writing this?

- Is this the best timing for my message?

- Would another form of communication be more effective, e.g., a phone call or meeting?

- Is someone else communicating the same information?

- What is the best way to send this information, e.g., E-mail, fax, or traditional mail?

STEP 5. WORKSHEET:
CONSIDERING YOUR READER

Suggested time: 30 min.

Purpose: Participants will identify ways to clearly communicate with their readers. Participants will also explore how their own reading preferences can influence writing style. This worksheet can be completed individually or with a colleague.

Please answer the following questions. Once completed, you may discuss your answers with a colleague.

1. In what ways do you consider the reader(s)' needs for the information you are providing?
2. Based on the previous background reading, what steps will you take to ensure that your documents appeal to your intended readers?
3. What types of materials do you prefer to read (e.g., books, magazines, fiction, non-fiction, short stories, etc.), and why?
4. What types of materials do you avoid reading, and why?
5. In what ways does your writing style reflect your preferences in reading materials?

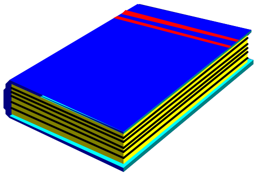
STEP 6. EXERCISE: LETTER TO MY SUPERVISOR (Part 2)

Suggested time: 30 min.

Purpose: To provide participants with an opportunity to re-write their previously developed letters using the elements of good writing outlined in Step 2.

Participants may work individually or with a colleague to review their letters. Participants will then have the opportunity to re-write their letters, using the information from the background readings and the "Writing Task Focus Sheet" and "Basic Rules of Punctuation, Grammar, Abbreviations, Capitalization and Spelling" handouts as references.

STEP 7. BACKGROUND READING: WRITING EFFECTIVE NOTES, MEMOS, LETTERS, AND REPORTS



Suggested time: 30 min.

Purpose: To provide participants with common guidelines for organizing and composing written documents. This activity can be done individually, with a colleague, or in a small group.

Study the following reading. Feel free to highlight sections or write comments in the margin throughout these activities.

WRITING EFFECTIVE NOTES, MEMOS, LETTERS, AND REPORTS

Most job tasks and functions within Head Start have a requirement for written documents. Whether it is a letter to a parent, a memo detailing a home visit, notes from a recent Policy Council meeting, or a formal program monitoring report, the need for documentation is ever present. Given the amount of documentation required on a daily basis, Head Start staff spend a considerable portion of their work day engaged in developing, reading, or responding to written documents.

Such a great demand for written communication means that staff must be clear and concise in their writing. A written document has a tremendous amount of impact on the writer and the reader. A message that is not communicated clearly will not get the intended result, thus leading to a need for additional time and energy spent repeating and clarifying messages. This takes precious time away from the writer and the reader, and also adds to workplace stress. The best way to avoid time-consuming miscommunications is to strive for clear and concise communication in every form of written documentation.

Suggestions follow for composing and organizing commonly used written formats (e.g., meeting notes, memos, letters, and progress reports). These suggestions provide basic guidelines for developing documents that get the message across in an effective manner that engages the reader.

Basic Guidelines for Organizing Thoughts and Ideas

Every written document, regardless of its form, carries a message. The key to writing a document that clearly expresses the message you want to send is to make sure you express your thoughts and ideas in a way that logically guides the reader to the core of your message. This is not always as simple a task as we might think. Sometimes, in trying to send a message, we give too much information, not enough information, or hide the message in unnecessary words and phrases. The most difficult part of writing is organizing information. Whether long or short, all documents should be logically organized and easy to follow.

Here are some suggestions for organizing your thoughts and ideas:

1. Group similar or related ideas so readers don't have to search for them.

2. Put conclusions or decisions first, then give supporting facts and reasons. Always provide details and background information to support conclusions and decisions.

3. Short documents should express the point at the start of the document; long documents (e.g., reports) should repeat the message in each section.

4. Put key points at the beginning of a document to get your readers' attention and encourage them to keep reading.

5. In long documents, make sure you express your main point again in the conclusion.

6. Develop main headlines to organize information, especially in long documents.

7. If the document is long, include a brief explanation of its organization at the beginning to provide a road map for the reader.

Sequencing Information in Memos, Notes, Letters, and Reports

The manner in which information is sequenced in a document depends on its type and how it will be used. Generally, there are three main ways to sequence information:

- Chronological: Provides details in a time- or date-specific order. Presenting information in a chronological order is useful for minutes of meetings and memos of detailed conversations. Events are listed in the order they happened with important information discussed first, followed by the chronological details. Within those details, important points or action steps are highlighted, underlined, or bold faced.

- Order of importance: Presents information in a format from most important to least important. This sequence is most appropriate for memos and reports, particularly long ones in which you want to ensure that the reader gets your bottom line message up front. The order of placement of information in the document is determined by what the reader needs to know or do first.

- Specific to general: Provides the most detailed or complicated information first, followed by general support or background information. This sequence is most useful in business letters where a specific request is made and must be justified.

Writing Effective Memos

Memos have become a way of life in the workplace. They are one of the most highly used forms of internal communication and documentation. Whether on paper or sent electronically, memos facilitate day-to-day program activities and overall management. But they are not always written in a manner that gets the desired effect. They are sometimes too long, wordy, or written in a tone that miscommunicates the message.

As a rule, memos should primarily be used for internal program communication. External communication should be through letters or informal notes. A memo is generally used to:

- describe new or revised program procedures
- reinforce existing procedures
- announce policies and regulations (new and revised)
- request information
- transmit program-specific data
- confirm and/or document a conversation or agreement.

Memos should never be overly long, keeping in mind the reality of time spent on reading and responding to numerous memos and other documents during the work day. It is best to keep a memo limited to 1–2 pages; exceptions are progress reports that are organized in memo form.

In writing a memo it is best to:

1. Determine the appropriate style and tone for your reader(s). Do you need to be formal or informal? This will depend on how well you know the reader. You can take a more informal tone with those with whom you work on a daily basis. You may want to keep your tone formal with someone who is not as familiar to you. For example, your tone with a coworker will be different than that you use with a member of the Board of Directors.

2. Determine how much information your reader needs and provide only what is essential to convey your message and get your point across. If extensive background information is required, consider enclosing a reference document (e.g., a separate informational report). Do not attempt to cram a lot of information into the body of your memo—chances are it will not be read thoroughly.

3. Keep your memo to one topic. This focuses your message and helps your reader to respond quickly. Memos that cover several subjects often require a longer response (if one is required), and make it difficult for the reader to file the memo according to subject.

4. Include deadlines and next steps for memos that request action or information, putting them under a separate headline or highlight them so they stand out in the text.

Writing Effective Reports

Reports are probably the second most popular form of communication and documentation within the workplace. Head Start requires Federal staff and grantees to provide written reports on various aspects of program operations, many on a regular basis. Regardless of the type or purpose of the report, there is a need to be clear, concise, and to the point.

Refer to the same guidelines for tone, writing to the needs of the reader, and organization in memos when writing reports. The challenge is always to structure the information so that it is useful to the reader. This is particularly important given the fact that reports are usually written for those outside of the workplace who will form an opinion of the organization based on the quality of the report.

A well-written report includes:

- A cover letter or memo identifying the report and thanking the reader.

- A transmittal letter that is more formal than the cover letter, states the purpose of the report, and summarizes the findings.

- A cover that identifies the title of the report and the organization's name.

- Title page (behind the cover) that lists title, author, date, and project number.

- An acknowledgment page to thank those who contributed.

- An executive summary of key issues and final recommendations or findings; no more than one-tenth the size of the report.

- An introduction that outlines the purpose, background, and scope of the report; it should be brief.

- A discussion of recommendations and findings.

- The body of the report that details procedures or methodology, the plan for implementation, an analysis of the problem or situation, supporting data, and background information.

- A conclusion and final summary that briefly restate the major findings and recommendations.

- Appendices containing support documentation, if needed.

Writing Effective Head Start Program Review Reports

A key writing task for Head Start Federal staff revolves around the development of reports on Federal program monitoring reviews. These reports provide critical guidance for continuous Head Start program improvements and must therefore be clear and concise in providing information, and feedback. The program review report must be written to provide an accurate portrayal of the program's strengths and challenges in regards to program effectiveness, and adherence to the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

A critical aspect of the process of writing review reports is the structuring of statements reflecting the findings of the review as well as the program's strengths. These statements must be clear and specific so as to guide programs toward maintaining and improving quality performance. It is important that they be written in a manner that supports corrective action related to program deficiencies and non-compliance with Head Start Program Performance Standards.

1. Essential Elements of a Program Review Strength

A well-written strength will include:

- A description of a service which is of high quality
- A demonstration of how the Performance Standards can be put into practice in an excellent way
- Clear details on exactly what was seen, heard, experienced, and read
- The benefit of the strength on services to children and families
- The way in which management systems support the practice/strength

A strength will not be:

- A way to “sugar-coat” a finding
- An attempt to find something positive to say when there is much that is negative

2. Essential Elements of a Program Review Finding

A well-written finding will include:

- A regulatory citation (including the specific part and subpart) and a description of the requirement
- A specific description of what is seen, heard, read or otherwise discovered, including quantification (frequency or extent) and qualification (severity or significance)
- An outline of the differences between what the regulation requires and what was found
- The impact of the situation on services to children and families

Well-written strengths and findings will be:

- Clear, with simple sentence structure and good choice of words
- Expression of facts, not feelings
- Comprehensive in covering the situation
- Reflective of review team consensus
- Concise

Taking Effective Notes

Note taking is an essential skill in the Head Start workplace. There are occasions when memos and reports to document or communicate are not necessary. Notes are a way to document observations and detail the outcome of meetings and interviews. They can be informal, for the writer’s files only, or they can be formal documentation for the organization’s records.

Grantee and Federal staff are required to take comprehensive notes during the program monitoring process. It is important that review team notes provide an accurate reflection of what happened, since they will be used to compile the full review report.

Effective note-taking requires:

- Writing in complete sentences; shorthand should only be used for personal record keeping.
- Writing brief but accurate statements of observation, avoiding wordiness and jargon.
- Organizing notes according to items on agenda (meeting notes) or flow of discussion (interview notes).
- Making a distinction between the facts of what occurred and your own interpretation.
- Clearly identifying recommendations, action items, or deliverables.
- Including date and time, title of meeting, subject of interview or observation, and names of attendees or interviewees.

Writing Effective Letters

Writing a clear, concise, and properly structured business letter is also an important skill for Head Start program and Federal staff. Letters are used to communicate with individuals and organizations key to program implementation (e.g., parents, governing body members, etc.). Letters can also provide a lasting impression of the organization they represent.

Business letters should always be clearly written; neatly formatted; correct in grammar, punctuation, and spelling; and formatted according to the organization's style guide. The content of an effective letter takes into account the tone you want to set with the reader—either formal or informal.

In writing an effective business letter you should:

- Strive for brevity, clarity, and friendliness.
- Avoid a stuffy, impersonal, casual, or overly friendly tone that may distance or offend the reader.
- Write in active voice.
- Keeping the reader in mind, use "you or your" as often as possible to keep reader engaged.
- Specify if you are speaking for yourself or the program; use "I" or "we" to denote personal opinion or involvement; otherwise use the organization's name.

- Strive to keep communication open by using language that provides a thoughtful and sincere tone.

Proper Use of E-mail

The growing use of E-mail to communicate within and among Head Start programs and Federal offices makes it necessary to establish some rules of etiquette. Miscommunications and improper communication are more prevalent with the use of E-mail than any other form of written communication because it is immediate, but not face-to-face. Because of these factors, we tend to write before we think, and not give much consideration to the tone of the message, spelling, or grammar.

Following are suggestions for improving E-mail communications:

1. Communications that require immediate response should be completed by phone. Don't assume that your messages will be read and responded to as soon as they are received.

2. Indicate the need for action or quick response in the subject line of your message to prompt a timely response.

3. Know when to follow up successive E-mails with a phone call or meeting. Continuous back and forth E-mails on a particular subject can be aggravating to the reader and fail to resolve the issue or concern.

4. Continue to use the "reply" link when responding to a series of E-mails that were generated from an original message. Replying by starting a new message will break the link between the original message and the reply.

5. Alert readers as to why they are receiving a forwarded message by re-writing the subject line, otherwise they will be confused as to why they are receiving the message.

6. Avoid sending E-mail messages when you are angry or agitated. Do not write in an E-mail message anything that you would not say to the person face-to-face.

7. Keep messages short and to the point out of respect for the reader's time. Be specific about your main point or message.

8. Avoid sending messages to people who do not need the information. Check your distribution list before sending your message.

9. Spell check your E-mail!

10. Sign your messages so the reader knows it came from you.

E-mail communication can be a fast and effective way to communicate—if you take the reader's needs into consideration and follow these simple suggestions.

STEP 8. WORKSHEET. PRACTICE WRITING STRENGTHS AND FINDINGS

Suggested time: 45 min.

Purpose: To provide participants with an opportunity to identify and practice writing well-written program review findings and program strengths.

Individually, or in pairs refer to the handouts “Examples of Strengths and Findings” and proceed with the following:

1. Review the examples in the handouts and assess them against the criteria outlined in the Step 7 Background Reading.
2. Select two or three examples you feel do not meet the criteria and re-write them.
3. Select a partner (if working individually), and review and discuss your re-written statements. Specifically identify missing, unclear or misleading information.

HANDOUT: EXAMPLES OF STRENGTHS AND FINDINGS

STRENGTHS

1. Fruit Valley Head Start's monitoring system promptly identifies current and potential problems and enables the agency to take speedy corrective action.

2. One interagency agreement serves as a model of community collaboration. This agreement between the Apple Valley School District, the Peach Mountain School District, Region 12 Infant/Toddler Program, PCS Head Start, the State Department of Health, and the County Department of Health is a well-developed collaboration that lays the groundwork for future partnerships. This strength relates to 45 CFR 1304.41(a)(2)(iv)(4).

3. The program had many strengths in partnering with families, sharing information, resources and offering multiple opportunities to collaborate and partner with parents.

4. Parents had the opportunity to enter the early childhood education profession through the teacher apprenticeship program that leads to entry level job employment.

5. There is an effective computerized accounting system.

6. Board of Trustees and key college personnel were actively involved and knowledgeable of the Head Start program. The partnership with the college is an asset for the Head Start program.

7. Health and nutrition education were apparent in classroom settings, and for parents through parent meetings, newsletters, handouts, and center bulletin boards. Health has been well integrated into the classroom settings.

8. Parents participated in the first annual Children's Faire.

9. The system of staff development fosters upward mobility.

10. The program took a "strengths based" approach while helping families to deal with serious issues.

11. There are procedures to ensure confidentiality of personnel files and Child Abuse and Neglect reporting forms.

12. There was high attendance at parent activities and trainings. As an example, the review found the Berry Center had 100 parents attend one event. The total population of Berryville is only 600. This center has 12 families. The Science Fair had approximately 150 people in attendance, which was observed by a reviewer.

FINDINGS

1. Of the files reviewed, the reviewers excluded late entry enrollees and found that 70% (6) had no evidence of completed dental exam and two (90%) did not have evidence of completed physical exams. There was little or no documentation of efforts with families to complete these exams. 1304.20(a)(1)(ii)(A)(C)(iii)(iv)

2. Minutes of Policy Council do not reflect approval/disapproval of the Policy Council in the decisions to hire or terminate any person who works primarily for the Fruit Valley Head Start program. 1304.50(d)(1)(xi)

3. Classroom environments did not reflect the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of families served. For example, there was a limited number of books in Spanish for children and adults; dolls, puzzles and posters depicting a variety of cultures including children with special needs; and items representing home life. 1304.21(a)(1)(ii) & 1304.21 (a)(3)(i)(E)

4. The review found that out of ten personnel files reviewed, several did not contain essential or required documents even though two recent file reviews had been conducted by grantee staff and written procedures had been developed. Several of the ten personnel files reviewed did not contain documentation for TB testing and other physical examination information required for employees.

5. Child and family file documentation did not indicate that staff consistently determined income eligibility, as required by the Performance Standards.

6. There is no EHS self-assessment for program design and management. 1304.51(i)(1)

7. It is important to note that the present curriculum and lack of individualization does not support an outcome-based measurement of program results that is the direction of Head Start.

8. The children's education program, the curriculum, was not reflective of individual needs. 1304.20 (f)

9. From interviews it was found that the grantee's nutrition services are not supported by staff or consultants who are registered

dietitians or nutritionists. Management staff could not describe a process for selecting consultants, nor for evaluating their competency.

10. No connection has been made between the Community Assessment and linking to community partners to provide needed services. The community assessment contains only a general picture of the community as a whole. For example, families have difficulty accessing dental care, but there is no assessment of dental service availability within the section on health services.

11. Early Head Start does not track attendance and has no written monitoring procedure. Monitoring needs to be strengthened to assure that children do not remain enrolled who are no longer in the program—when there are eligible three-year olds who could receive services.

12. As evidenced by conversation with one focus family, reviewed in files and observed in the child's behavior in the classroom, the communication system is lacking. In relation to the health care needs of children, there was not timely completion and follow-up by Advocates. This finding relates to 45 CFR 1304.20 (a).

13. Ensure that parents provide informed consent. Consider revising forms to include a provision for having the parents initial their consent or denial of consent for each specific request, in lieu of denoting their preference by checking or circling an option without their initials. The local hospital medical records librarian may serve as an excellent resource.

14. The program needs to articulate a clear, shared vision for your Head Start program derived from, and agreed upon, by staff, parents, interagency partners and community members. This vision should be based upon a well-defined, comprehensive program philosophy that clearly states your approach for working with children, staff and the community.

15. Family and Community Partnerships staff positions need to be made full-time in order to provide time to access training in building partnerships with families and within the community, to disseminate that training amongst teaching staff, and to provide supervision and support to teaching staff to ensure consistency in services.

Taken from review reports in several regions. All names are fictitious.

STEP 9. WORKSHEET: WRITING ASSESSMENT

Suggested time: 60 min.

Purpose: To encourage participants to use the information contained in the materials to assess their current writing skills and determine areas for improvement.

Participants may work independently or with a colleague to review two or three written documents recently developed in the workplace. Use the "Effective Writing Checklist" handout on the next page for your review.

Following the review and assessment of the document, participants may provide input and feedback to each other.

HANDOUT: EFFECTIVE WRITING CHECKLIST[2]

Instructions: Use this checklist to review and assess the draft of your written document.

Focus	Writing Element	Areas for Edit Review
Content	Purpose	☐ Clear to reader ☐ Specific in request for action/information
	Information	☐ Accurate and complete ☐ Adequate detail ☐ Persuasive in listing benefits to reader
Sequence	Main Point (Bottom Line)	☐ Identified at start of document *or* ☐ Strategically placed
	Organization	☐ Contents strategically presented
Design	Format	☐ Enough headlines, sidelines, and bulleted and numbered lists ☐ White space to frame ideas ☐ Highlights focusing on deadlines and action items
	Presentation	☐ Effective format for statistical information ☐ Use of charts, tables, or graphs considered
Structure	Paragraphs	☐ Begin with a topic sentence ☐ Focuses on one topic ☐ Transitions used to connect ideas ☐ Five to six lines in length ☐ Varied in structure and length ☐ Streamlined to 15–20 words
Tone/Style	Words	☐ Simple, specific, and straightforward ☐ Minus affectation and jargon ☐ Acronyms explained ☐ Use of familiar terminology ☐ Headlines worded for impact

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[2] Adapted from: Vest Pocket Guide to Business Writing, Deborah Dumaine, Prentice Hall, Paramus, NJ. 1997

Focus	Writing Element	Areas for Edit Review
Tone/Style	Style	☐ Personable, upbeat, and direct ☐ Appropriate for audience ☐ Use of active voice ☐ Positive approach
Final Proof		☐ Correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling ☐ Computer spell-check completed ☐ Outsider review ☐ Highlighted new information (if repeat mailing

STEP 10: SUMMARY

Suggested time: 10 min.

PERSONAL REVIEW

What did you learn from this activity?

1. ____
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2. ____
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3. ____
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How will you use your new knowledge and skills in your work?

1. ____
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2. ____
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3. ____
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What other things do you think you might need to learn in order to apply writing skills?

1. ______________________________

2. ______________________________

3. ______________________________